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The Wisdom of the East

EDITED BY J. L. CRANMER-BYNG M.C.



WINGS OF DEATH

*Other translations of poems of Rabindranath Tagore
by Aurobindo Bose*

A FLIGHT OF SWANS
THE HERALD OF SPRING

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WINGS OF DEATH

The Last Poems of
Rabindranath Tagore

translated from the Bengali by

AUROBINDO BOSE

With a Foreword by Professor

GILBERT MURRAY

O.M. D.C.L. D.LITT. LL.D.

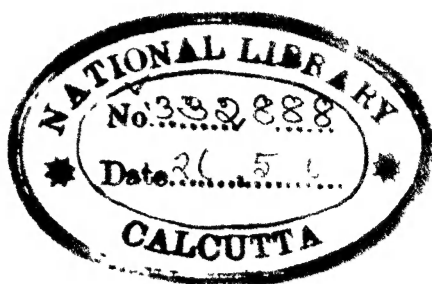


John Murray
50 Albemarle Street
London

What the great poets had affirmed
in their finest moments, was the nearest we could come
to an authoritative religion

YEATS

Autobiography, pp. 177-8



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To the memory of

Ananda Mohan Bose

Patriot and servant of India,

who in his last New Year's greetings wrote to me,

when I was a pupil at Tagore's school:

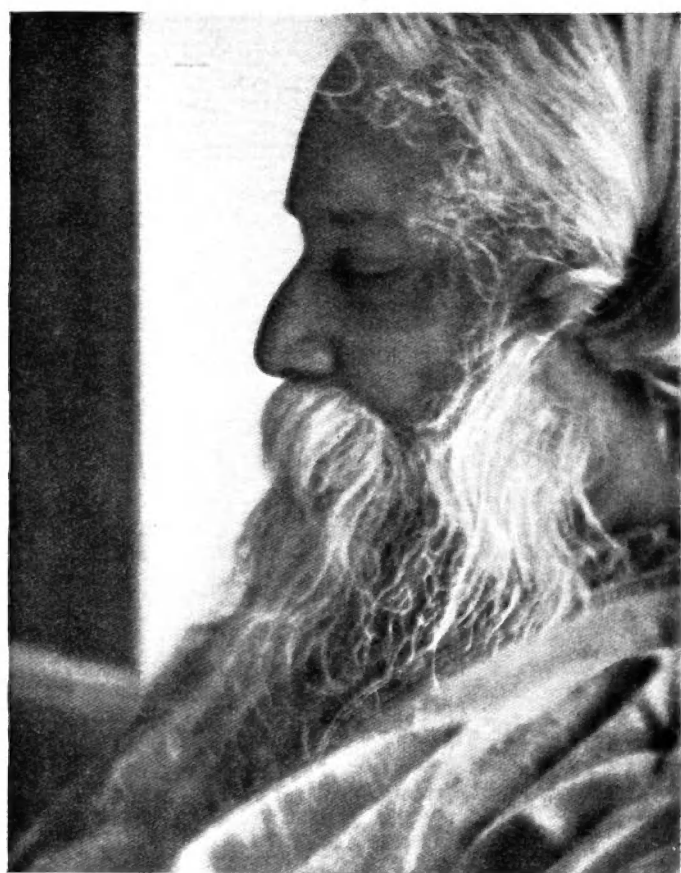
'God keep you now and always,

when Father is far away.'

ଆସୁ ମିଛୁ ଶ୍ୟାମ ସମ ଚାନ୍ଦ
ସୂର୍ଯ୍ୟ ନିଗଳି ମାର
ଧାରଣ୍ୟ ଉଦ୍ଧୃତ ସୂର୍ଯ୍ୟ ।
ଓଡ଼ିଆମାନଙ୍କୁ

Arriving at the sunset shore,
Rabi sends his last evensong to the East

Rabindranath Tagore



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very sad that I could not lay this book in the hands of the late Gilbert Murray, and thank him for his Foreword. Professor Murray knew Tagore well. In the 'twenties Tagore had been his guest at Boar's Hill, Oxford, and the Institute for Intellectual Co-operation of the League of Nations brought out a pamphlet entitled *East and West*, containing an exchange of letters between Murray and Tagore. Though past ninety, Professor Murray readily agreed to write an introduction to *Wings of Death*, which he had read in the manuscript. The essay was written only six months before he passed away—a homage from a Western scholar to the memory of an Indian friend. It makes me particularly happy to feel that Professor Murray read these poems on Death shortly before he himself faced 'the Great Unknown'. In one of his letters he said that though he, a humanist, had no entry into this world of the mystic and the religious believer he still could feel its beauty and holiness. In silence I bow to his memory and thank him for an essay which adds to the value of this volume.

Next I want to thank Mrs Kate Ohly of The Abbey, New Barnet, for the gift of the letter from Tagore which is reproduced in facsimile in the Appendix. This letter was written to one Mrs McCarthy in England a year after Tagore received the Nobel Prize. I take it that this lady on reading the *Gitānjali*, which brought sudden fame to Tagore in Europe, must have written to him asking about his religious beliefs—and this was the poet's answer. It is a kind fate that has preserved this letter from destruction, for Mrs Ohly found it amongst the papers of her late husband. How it got there is a complete mystery! This

Acknowledgements

letter has a value for posterity that is unique and priceless, for it shows that earnest seekers of God have often to break through the constraining shell of all formal religions to arrive at the source of the Godhead.

I also want to thank the Vishva-Bhārati for permission to translate the later poems of Tagore, not only those included in this volume but also those in *A Flight of Swans* and *The Herald of Spring*.

Lastly I would thank most sincerely my friend, Mr F. L. Lucas, Reader in English at Cambridge, for the infinite pains he has taken to go through my translations.

A. B.

Translator's note

With regard to my translation, it has been a most difficult task and I am not too satisfied with my efforts. I feel that they have not that ease of flow and rhythmic quality which some of my translations in *A Flight of Swans* perhaps have. The poems in the original are often so compact and concentrated in thought—hard and rough like uncut diamond—that it is not easy to render them into English. But I can truthfully say that I have kept as close as possible to the original—my aim having been rather to transmit undimmed the great thoughts buried in these (Tagore's very last poems) than to make the diction poetically more satisfying.

I have left the poem numbers of the original Bengali edition at the head of each poem. Where a date of composition is known it appears at the foot of the poem.

A. B.

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The object of the Editor of this series is a very definite one. He desires above all things that these books shall be the ambassadors of good-will between East and West. He hopes that they will contribute to a fuller knowledge of the great cultural heritage of the East, for only through real understanding will the West be able to appreciate the underlying problems and aspirations of Asia to-day. He is confident that a deeper knowledge of the great ideals and lofty philosophy of Eastern thought will help to a revival of that true spirit of charity which neither despises nor fears the nations of another creed and colour.

J. L. CRANMER-BYNG

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LONDON, W.1

FOREWORD

BY PROFESSOR GILBERT MURRAY, O.M.

The fame of Tagore as a great poet and a great *Guru* stands, I suppose, as firm in Europe as in his own country. But fashions change, curiosity turns in new directions, and not many of us recall the time when the translation of his *Gitānjali* and *The Crescent Moon* burst upon readers of poetry here with almost the effect of a revelation. The beginning was a cry of discovery by William Rothenstein, who suggested to Yeats his famous introduction. The translation was by the poet himself but only into English prose. Here was a real poet, and a poet of a new kind, one who could make the imaginations of East and West understand one another. His genius was lyrical; he had brought out, so we were told by those who knew, the rhythms and metres, tones and undertones of his musical Bengali language in a way unknown before. All that was lost to us; what was left? Some 'meaning' or sympathy, some of the magic of an imagination which always 'in the finite saw the infinite'.

That was in 1912, in Tagore's full maturity. He had been born in 1861, he had written hundreds of songs, sonnets, dramas of different kinds; largely conjured out of him by increasing study of English poetry, Shelley, Keats, Milton and others. Like Shelley, he was a rebel; he had hated his schooling; he hated the accepted conventions and prejudices. Like Shelley he resented the shallow and sometimes cruel orthodoxies surrounding him, and was always preaching the religion he felt to be true. In one novel he wittily satirizes the extreme devotees of Brahminism. His hero, Gora, is the leader of a band of fanatical students, a man fairer in complexion, more loud-voiced and daring than

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the rest and more fiercely intolerant of any lapse from strict religious etiquette. In the end this champion proves to be not Brahmin nor even Hindu, but a mere outcast, the child of an Irish sergeant who had been saved by a Hindu woman in the Mutiny and brought up as her own. Tagore wanted to revive the true spirit of ancient India, calm and strong; till then, there must be no mere intolerance, no vanity. 'Let us hide ourselves till we can justify ourselves.' In this spirit he founded the great *Āshram* or Forest School of Sāntiniketan. It was in the forest, round it a treeless plain, sun-baked and storm-swept. Here the poet's father, Debendranath, had made a place for men's retirement. It was a school of thought and freedom. All classes were in the open air. The chapel has no walls or roof.¹ A few old rules taken from the poets are inscribed on the gate; that here no life must be taken, no flesh or idol brought in; no irreverent word spoken against any worship or deity, and no indulgence in unclean mirth. It was taken for granted that religion must be the background of all, and that this religion would be basically that of the Brahmasomaj, a reformed and purified Hinduism, founded by Ramohan Ray in the second decade of the nineteenth century. It was now spreading widely among enlightened Hindus, but in Tagore's hands even the Brahmasomaj was to be further liberalized. The school to-day does not observe many of the Hindu festivals, but has half-holidays for the birthdays of Christ, Buddha, Mahomet, Ramohan Ray and others. Tagore founded the school with four pupils, two of whom were his own sons. It is now one of the great universities of India. There is

¹ Prof. Murray is here slightly mistaken. The walls of the chapel were made wholly of pieces of coloured glass and the floor of white marble bordered with black. When the morning sun flooded the chapel, we children, squatting on the marble floor, often could not follow Tagore's sermons, but gazed with fascination at the colourful mosaic on the white marble floor.

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every provision for solitude and meditation. Only in solitude can truth be found, but when found it must be published and explained. Real life must be understood and lived, and not forgotten as it was by ascetics. Students were encouraged to go out and teach or help in the neighbouring villages. In 1910, after a year of absolute seclusion, Tagore himself felt the need to come out and speak to the world. Meantime his poems, and dramas, and his educational work, had gone on year after year, and his fame had constantly increased. He intended at this time to travel to the West, but this was his fiftieth year and his countrymen's feelings, long contained, burst out in Calcutta into an ovation so enthusiastic that it was too much for him. Illness prevented him from sailing. In 1912 however came his visit to England with the translation of *Gitanjali*, in 1913 his Nobel Prize for poetry, and afterwards an almost triumphant progress through Europe.

Many volumes of poetry in translation followed, and many hundreds of songs in his own language. Rural Bengal, it is said, was flooded with them; some five hundred were specially popular. He was an immensely prolific writer. Indeed a friend of his once told me, with pardonable exaggeration, that the poet composed a new poem every day, was possessed by it, formed it and often set it to music without effort, almost as people sing in their baths. He himself speaks of a barren period in which 'nothing in particular seemed^{to} anxious to express itself', but evidently that was exceptional. Normally, in this world of mystery and beauty, he always found something that called to him for expression, the form varying as the subject varied: lyric, sonnet, drama. In such constant outpouring of course there must be monotony; the same themes recur, the same phrases, the same metaphors; but there is, I should say, no mere facility, no cheapness, no insincerity. There is always that touch of the infinite. But he never seems to feel 'I have expressed this as best I could

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already. I must now leave it.' On the contrary, if he feels it again he says it again; that is, he makes it into a new poem. Indeed he is always making things new: when he translates his own poems into English he adds and omits and alters in a surprising way. He never treats his work as finished and sacred. He was indeed one of those who 'Lisped in numbers, for the numbers came'. His life was a constant poem; and consequently a poem which, like life itself, is infinitely varied, infinitely monotonous.

The present collection, untranslated before, re-awakens one's interest in a very special way. All of it belongs to the period of his last illness. It contains the poem he dictated the very morning of the operation from which he never awoke, and also the one which he chose to be sung at his commemoration service. And apart from that, as all through life he had been in the habit of facing the daunting challenge of life, and finding poetical expression for its great issues and questions, in this collection he is steadily looking towards the eternal mystery and problem of death, facing it as a philosopher and a poet. The Beguiler shall beguile him no more. 'The day's last sun has asked its last question, *Who are you?* and it receives no answer.' No conclusive answer, perhaps, but at least he did see before him an 'ocean of Peace', and was 'ready without fear to set sail out to the open sea'.

INTRODUCTION

Tagore died on 7 August 1941. In May of that year we had celebrated his eightieth birthday. At the beginning of September 1937 he had passed through a severe illness and it was almost by a miracle that his life was saved. After that he had been a very sick man and never fully recovered. But during the winter 1939-40, when I stayed in Sāntiniketan,¹ after my return from Europe, he was still holding classes, reading from his own works. Though weak and aged, he insisted on taking them—for he was a born teacher and loved to meet the young. In November or December of 1939 Mahatma Gandhi had come with his wife to Sāntiniketan to see the poet, and stayed with us for a week. This was their last meeting, and by a lucky chance I happened to be standing behind, in a corner of the room, when these two great sons of modern India—the *Mahatma*² and *Gurudev*³—embraced each other. I remember so well the daily divine service the Mahatma held under the open sky after sunset for the inmates of the *Ashram*.

I saw Tagore last at the end of 1940. Both of us realized it would probably be our last meeting—and at parting I bowed to the ground, touching his feet with my forehead, and he gave me his blessing. His room was darkened to keep the strong light from his failing eyes. He spoke about it with a resigned

¹ The name of the place means 'The Abode of Peace'. It is in the heart of rural Bengal and there Tagore started an experimental school with four boys; to-day it has developed into the Vishva-Bhārati University, a living memorial to Tagore, the born educationalist and lover of children.

² The great soul.

³ The revered teacher.

Introduction

sadness in his voice—how hard such a fate must have been for a poet who had so dearly loved this visible world.

All through 1941 he was bed-ridden, being nursed with loving care by his nearest relations and some members of the teaching staff. An operation that was postponed for years because of his advanced age had, at last, to be undertaken after consultation among the leading doctors and surgeons of Calcutta. Among them was the foremost physician of Calcutta, Dr B. C. Roy, F.R.C.S.—the present Chief Minister of West Bengal. For the operation Tagore was brought down from Sāntiniketan to Calcutta. Afterwards he lay unconscious for a few days and passed away on the 7th of August. The scene, both during his departure from Sāntiniketan—when weeping children and teachers from his school lined both sides of the route as far as the boundaries of the *Ashram*—and later when his flower-bedecked body was carried to the cremation ground on the banks of the Ganges, was moving beyond description. His name 'Rabi' means the sun, and in his own words, 'Arriving at the sunset shore, Rabi sent his last evensong to the East', and disappeared from our ken for ever.

The poems I have translated for *Wings of Death* are a selection from the four small volumes written during this period. 'Borderland' contains poems written in September 1937 when he had just narrowly escaped from the clutches of death and was convalescing. In these poems you are made to feel, poignantly, that he has seen death face to face—that he has plunged deeply into those unfathomed depths and brought back a few imperishable treasures. The lines appear almost halting and stuttering—for how can human language convey what is beyond conveying!

The other three—'On the Sick-bed', 'Recovery', and 'Last Poems'—were written during his last illness (1940-1), ending with the poem 'You have strewn the path of Creation'. This was

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written immediately before the fatal operation that extinguished the light of 'Rabi'.

I would have preferred to have ended my short note here, letting the poems speak for themselves—poems that literally come from the 'Borderland' of life and death. You feel that these utterances come from one who is already one step beyond the grave. What he may have to say to us is not to be comprehended just with our rational, intellectual self, but with that other self upon which shines the Grace of God. These poems make one think of Beethoven's posthumous string quartets—so difficult for most of us to understand. Reverential silence is the aptest tribute I could bring to these last poems of my 'Gurudev'.

But I have been told by some, including the late Gilbert Murray, that these poems 'need an introduction by someone who understands the background and also sees the difficulty that ordinary western readers would feel'. But though difficult they may be for a Westerner, he adds, 'I, for instance, am conscious of sudden flashes of very fine poetry.'

I ardently wish I had been lucky enough to have the co-operation of an erudite Indian scholar or Professor of Philosophy to write the introduction Gilbert Murray asks for. But since I have not, I must do it myself as best I can—yet all the time acutely conscious of my limitations. As in my previous introductions,¹ I must repeat once again that I have been a nuclear physicist all my life, and know very little either of Literature or of the History of Religions. Fortunately, the one source I can draw upon is my early religious upbringing in Tagore's school where Tagore himself taught and elucidated to us the deeper meanings of the hymns of the *Upanishads*.

Gilbert Murray was right—for only in the background of Upanishadic thoughts could these poems be understood. From the lips of his great father, the *Maharshi* (the title his countrymen

¹ *A Flight of Swans*, 1955. *The Herald of Spring*, 1957. John Murray.

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gave him, which means 'the great sage'), the poet, as a child, had learnt to chant the hymns of the *Upanishads*, and his spiritual life was nurtured by them.

The *Rishis* (seers) of Ancient India knew that the human mind could never completely comprehend Brahma, the Absolute. It is beyond the power of human speech to describe Him. Therefore when one tries to describe the Brahma, one gets caught in apparent contradictions and is forced to speak in negations. 'He is not this, He is not that.' There is one remarkable cryptic verse in the *Upanishads*: 'I do not think that I know Him, nor that I know Him not.' Another verse says:

That devotee conquers all fear who has experienced *Ānanda*, the divine bliss of the Brahma—the Brahma whom no words can describe, from whom all words come back baffled.

And although all words return baffled, unable to describe the Brahma, yet one *Rishi* breaks out in ecstatic joy:

Listen to me, ye sons of the immortal spirits, ye who live in the heavenly abode—I have known the Supreme Person whose light shines forth from beyond the darkness.

This means that though the intellect cannot comprehend Brahma, we can still realize Him through the mystic union of the individual soul with the Supreme Soul. Tagore comments: 'Brahma is the infinite ideal of perfection. We are not what we truly are; we are ever to become true, ever to become Brahma. There is the eternal play of love in the relation between this being and the becoming; and in the depth of this mystery is the source of all truth and beauty that sustains the endless march of Creation.'

Contemplating Him under the starry heaven of an Indian sky our *Rishis* realized Him as *Ānandam* (bliss), and sang:

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Who could have breathed or moved if the sky were not overflowing with joy, with love?

And they said:

From God who is Bliss, are all beings born;
Through God who is Bliss, do all living beings move;
Unto God who is Bliss, do they (after death) proceed and enter?

Who were the *Rishis*, the seers of India? The *Upanishads* describe them as: 'Those who having attained the Supreme *Ātmā* (soul) in knowledge, were filled with wisdom and had found abiding Peace. They had become united with the All and had entered into the life of the Universe.'

Compare this with what Plotinus says in the following extract from the *Fifth Ennead*, 8:

They see all not in process of becoming but in Being, and they see themselves in the other. Each Being contains within itself the whole intelligible world. Therefore all is everywhere. Each is there all and all is each. Man as he now is has ceased to be the All. But when he ceases to be an individual he rises again and penetrates the whole world. Then, become one with the All, he creates the All.

Tagore drank deep from the waters of this spiritual fountain-head. It was this vision of a *Brahma* who permeated with His immanent Presence both the starry heavens and the inner heart of man that gave wings to Tagore's poetry. Like those sages who composed hymns of praise to the sun, in whose effulgence they saw the glory of God, Tagore too could sing:

I know the joy that hidden in the heart of Light
Touches me, is one with my soul.
I have been anointed in the holy waters of Consciousness,
That flow from the font of Light,
And have my share of immortality.
In this multitudinous earth

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I can be united with the Supreme Me
And enter the path of Bliss.

And again:

Every morning in the gracious touch of Light
I receive the homage of Existence.
My blood stream merges in the stream of Light,
And its message echoes silently
In my body, in my mind.

Do we not seem to hear echoes of the *Upanishads* in these and many other poems, scattered throughout this volume? *Mukti*, or emancipation, consists in this ever-widening of consciousness, in extending the bonds of loving sympathy till it embraces the whole world. This is the message of both the *Upanishads* and of the Buddha who said: 'With everything, whether it is above or below, remote or near, visible or invisible, thou shalt preserve a relation of unlimited love without any animosity.'

When one has come near to death and returned to the world—as Tagore did—one gets a new vision of the world and the standards of this world—glory, human prestige—loose their grip on the mind. As Simone Weil so truly says:

Truth is *secret*. It is not revealed except in nakedness and that nakedness is death, which means the rupture of all those attachments which for each human being constitute the reason for living; those whom he loves, public esteem, and possessions, material and moral, all that.¹

Compare:

In the twilight of my consciousness
I see my body float by in the dark stream,
Carrying her gatherings
Of feeling, suffering and remembrances.

¹ *Intimations of Christianity*, p. 82.

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As she moves from the far to the far-distant
Her form fades; . . .

and again:

At noon—half awake, half asleep—
I saw as in a dream
The outer shell of my being drop off.
In the stream of the Unknown
Floated away all the gatherings of the miser—
His name, his deeds, his honour, his dishonour,
Remembrances of shame
That bore the seal of passing sweetness.

Compare this with a passage from the *Sixth Ennead*:

Often when I awake from the slumber of the body and come to myself, I behold a wonderful beauty. Then I believe unshakeably that I belong to a better world; most glorious life works strongly in me and I am become one with the Godhead. Transferred into this I have reached that vital energy and have raised myself above all intellectual things. When I then climb down from this rest in the lap of the Godhead to intellectual understanding I ask myself how there can possibly be a sinking back out of that condition.

But every Seeker passes through the valley of sorrow, despair and doubt—what St John of the Cross calls 'the dark night of the Soul'.

The dark night of sorrow
Has come again and again at my door.
Her only weapon was
The troubled appearance of suffering,
The frightened gesture of fear,
The dark disguise of deceit!
Each time I believed in her mark of terror,
Each time I suffered meaningless defeat.

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But if, in spite of the aridity in and outside him, the seeker holds fast in his faith and waits patiently, then God will surely one day reveal Himself to him and touch his heart. Then the soul breaks out in a paean of joy:

Sweet is the world, sweet the dust of it,
This great hymn I chant in my heart.
It makes my life significant.
Day after day the gems of truth come to me
As a gift—their loveliness dims not.
Therefore at the border of death, this great hymn
'Sweet is the world, sweet the dust of it'
Echoes in the heart of Joy.
Behind the *Māyā* of evil
I have seen the light of the Eternal.
Truth's loveliness has taken form in earth's dust—
Knowing this, I salute the dust.

And he further sings:

Death cannot swallow life, which is immortal;
It only casts its shadow like *Rāhu*.¹
This I know for certain.
There is no plunderer
Hiding in the secret caves of the Universe,
Who can defraud love of its value—
This I know for certain.

Death had lost all its terrors for him—it was but a new birth:

May the bonds of earth dissolve,
The mighty Universe take me to her arms,
And I come to know fearlessly
The Great Unknown.

We are here in fact treading the holy ground of mystic experience. By its very nature it is supersensual and its truth can

¹ The demon who is supposed to devour the sun during an eclipse.

Introduction

neither be refuted nor proved. Its only verification is the inward experience and it is timeless. Its flowers have blossomed in the hearts of God-seekers in all lands and in all ages. The dialects in which the mystics have spoken may be various, but the truth at the heart of the kernel is the same. It is my conviction that Tagore had glimpses of that world, and much of his poetry and the letter I produce in the Appendix bear witness to that fact.

It is true that there is much repetition in these poems. But I would ask the reader to remember the circumstances under which they were written. Tagore was a very sick man, bed-ridden. But like the bird that at break of dawn sings its paean of joy to the glory of God, so too the poet had to chant each morning his litany to the Divine Creator, through whose Mercy he was born into this beautiful world he loved with the passionate love of a lover. But no bitterness lingered in his song of parting—only gratitude, deep, unending gratitude! And he knew, with the certainty of a child returning to its Mother, that the new life would also embrace him—with love. And yet with such touching modesty he speaks of his songs:

By my sick bed
Sluggishly flows the stream of life.
With weeds I create little shapes of beauty.
They have no great value—
And yet some recognition of life cleaves to them,
Though slight their value.

I now come to his last poem (on p. 93), dictated on the morning of his fatal operation. His wish to correct it later remained unfulfilled, for he never regained consciousness, but passed away a week later. This poem comes to us from one who has already, as it were, 'crossed the bar', and each reader must for himself hear the silent music that is evoked in his heart. I am reluctant to give

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my own explanation. Nevertheless, it is a difficult poem and many English listeners have sincerely thanked me for giving them help with it; so I put some thoughts down, with great hesitation, for what they are worth:

God is the divine lover who plays hide-and-seek with us. The picture of *Rādhā* and *Kṛishnā* of the *Vaishnava* poets naturally rises to our mind. He has given us freedom to accept Him or deny Him. Nor has He made the path easy for the seeker. But He is not in the least perturbed by our denial of Him. He can wait—and one day, after pursuing many false paths, we shall return to Him. He craves for our love not our blind obedience.

‘With skilful hands you have woven the net of false beliefs.’ The beauty of the world with its scents, colours and forms enraptures our hearts and we become attached to them. Also its terrors frighten us. Our beliefs are thus coloured by our sensual experiences and become anthropomorphic. But the seeker has to pierce through this *Māyā*—this net of false beliefs—has to turn his mind from the outer to the inner world and there realize the Absolute, Whom no words can describe.

‘For the Seeker, you have not kept the secret night.’

This is the most difficult line in the poem. What could the poet have meant by it? The following lines from the *Gītānjali* perhaps throw some light on it:

He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the pathmaker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and in shower and his garment is covered with dust. Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusky soil.

For the divine Bridegroom no nuptial chamber is needed—he is everywhere, among the poor, the downtrodden, the lowly. Like St Francis, like Sri Rāmākrishna,¹ you serve God, who is Love, by serving his children on this earth. Through that service,

¹ See Romain Rolland: *La vie de Rāmākrishna*.

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through that identification, is your union with the divine Beloved.

For our poet-mystic to enter on the journey to 'the Great Unknown' with this last song on his lips, is to me the most moving and fitting end to a life nobly lived—lived both in his Sāntiniketan *Ashram*, in a world of daily striving resonant with the voices of happy children, and in the world of contemplation,

'Where spreads the infinite sky for the soul to take her flight in.'

AUROBINDO BOSE

Pembroke College

CAMBRIDGE

June, 1959

BORDERLAND

(*Prāntik*)

Published 1938

3

As the invisible blow tore away the tangled net
 That bound me to the earth,
 I saw spread out before me the land—
 Solitary passionless, pitiless!
 Suddenly from destruction's tower-gate
 The great Solitary Being
 Sent out his call to the lonely one.
 Amidst the silence of countless stars
 I opened my eyes and knew:
 The lonely have no fear—
 Fear reigns only amidst the crowd;
 The lonely have no shame—
 Shame reigns only amidst the many!
 Lonely is the Creator,
 And his call comes to me to join in his work
 In the hidden land
 That lies in the shadow of his throne.
 Leaving behind my withered past
 That is doomed to perish,
 I must, empty-handed, create new life
 In the wide empty spaces.

29 Sept. 1937

4

The truth of me is plastered
 By the daubing of the world.
 Through neglect, through disregard,

Borderland

My pristine form is lost—
Imperishable though it be—
And the stamp of God erased.
I stood by the crossroads,
On my forehead the stamp,
Saying I was for sale.
Then at the hour
When light and shadow mingle,
And temple bells ring by the sea—
Peace descends upon the din
Of hoping and expecting;
Gone is the bustle of the market.
Then do I feel, with *Setār* in hand
I must go to the silent temple's door,
Wiping away the me that is stamped
With the values of the crowd.
At Creation's beginning,
The Joy that took form in me,
Lies covered in the dust
Smeared by the smoke of sleepless hungers.
That form I carry
Along the holy shore of the river of Death,
To the waters that sprang
At Creation's dawn.
Perhaps this journey is towards that pure Beginning
Which appears ever again in Creation's flow—
Sometimes in the thunderous voice of Destruction,
Sometimes with sudden wonder
In the light of the stars!

1 Oct. 1937

Borderland

5

O Past,
You are the mate of the backward-looking gaze,
The shadowy figure of unsated desires!
You keep me company,
Coming from the region of departed spirits.
Like humming bees from flowerless forests,
You play your *Setār* with eager zeal
And cast long shadows on twilight's parting.
O Past,
Tear away the fetters of dreams!
From the claims of Death
You have stolen
The treasures of anguish,
The vanity of desires—
Give them back to Death!
To-day in the cloudless sky,
On the flute of the wanderer
A tune is struck—
That tune will I follow.

4 Oct. 1937

8

One by one,
The lights on the stage go out
And empty is the hall.
At the call of Silence

Borderland

Profound peace descends upon me
Like dreamless sleep.
The actor's mask I had worn
Became meaningless
The moment the curtain dropped.
Before the crowd, I clad myself
In many trappings,
In many colours—
All that is washed away,
And in hushed wonder
I look into the profound depths of my
 being.
Even so in hushed wonder
The sky gazes at her stars,
When the sun dies
Wiping away the landscape.

9 Oct. 1937

9

In the twilight of my dim consciousness
I see my body float by in the dark stream,
Carrying her gatherings
Of feeling, suffering and remembrances.
As she moves from the far to the far-distant,
Her form fades;
The evening bells die out
Along the banks where shadows fall.
From house to house the doors close
Hiding the evening lamps;
The boats ply no more

Borderland

And the night thickens—
Silent is the forest.
With the hushed song of the bird,
The Universe offers itself in self-dedication
At the feet of the Great Silence.
Darkness, whose beauty no words can describe,
Descends upon this earth of many colours.
This body fades away
As a shadow, as a bubble
Into the fathomless gloom!
With clasped hands
I stand under the starry altar
And pray:
 'O Sun, you have withdrawn to yourself all your rays;
Now reveal your most benign form,
And let me see Him
Who is the selfsame One in you and in me!'

8 Dec. 1937

10

O Lord of Destruction,
Your Messenger of Death came suddenly
And brought me to the courtyard of your great hall.
Before me all was dark;
I could not see the invisible light
Hidden in the heart of Darkness—
The light that is the splendour of the Universe.
My own shadow had obstructed my sight.
From the dark cave of my being,

Borderland

That light would burst out in a song of praise
And spread to the ends of the starry heavens,
Where waited me a call.
Long had I practised on my harp
To become the poet of the Supreme One,
But the message of Rudra,¹ the Terrible One,
Did not echo in my silent songs.
Nor did His image rise from my heart
In its gracious loveliness,
And you turned me back.
When yet another day shall come,
The poet's message, like ripened fruit
Heavy with the fullness of joy,
Will drop noiselessly on your tray of Offering.
Then shall be fulfilled in the end
Life's last value,
Life's last journey,
Life's last invitation.

8 Dec. 1937

12

O Poet,
Take your last ablution
In the limpid waters of the emergent night.
This toiling earth has served you,
Has nourished you,
But do not cling to her.

¹ Lord Shiva. He represents the transmutative and destructive aspect of the Godhead.

Borderland

She has no hesitation to take away
What once she gave you.
The reward that you received at the outer gate—
Do not clutch it to your heart.
The gilding of the coin will wear away with time,
Revealing the stain within.
If you have cultivated the fruit in your orchard,
Let it find its end dropping to the earth.
The season of flowers is ended—
So let also end
Your being swayed by the breath of human flattery.

While marching forward,
Do not turn back and stretch out your hands.
In life,
What you gave truly,
Insult it not by asking for a price.
Let your begging bowl be your last offering,
Like withered leaves¹ that greet the Spring.

That for which you are waiting
With hope in your heart,
Is not glory—
It is the silent call of dawn to the new life;
It is the crown of morning light
On the brow of the newly awakened.

18 Dec. 1937

¹ In Bengal, where winter is very mild, the trees are thinned, but not completely bared of leaves.

Borderland

13

O New-comer,
This birth has given you value beyond all price.
With the sun and the stars
You have received the unique gift of Form.
The light that travels along the Milky Way
And touches the green brow of this earth,
Has kissed your eyes
And tied you forever in bonds of friendship
With the Universe.
From ages past the Great Message
Has come down the stream of Time,
And at this blest moment pays you homage.
In front of you lies the Soul's path,
Stretching toward Infinity;
Along that path you are the solitary traveller—
This great wonder is without end!

19 Dec. 1937

14

The time has come for the bird to depart.
The nest, song-silent, will soon drop to earth,
As the wind blows through the forest.
With withered leaves and flowers,
I shall fly in early dawn
The trackless sky, towards the shores
Of sunset.

Borderland

For long has this earth given me
Her hospitality.
Sometimes I have received the call
Of scented mango buds,
Gracious with Spring's prodigality;
Sometimes the cluster of *Asoka* flowers
Has silently craved for my song—
And I have poured it out with delight.
Sometimes the dusty storms of burning *Vaisākh*¹
Have choked my voice,
And made powerless my wings!
Through all this I am blessed
With the glory of life.
The weary journey on this side of the Ocean
Has come to an end.
For a moment I shall turn back,
And with bowed head
Chant my song of praise
To the Lord of this life.

Apr. 1934

18

Everywhere
The serpents exhale their poisonous breath;
To speak of gentle peace sounds like mockery.
Let me therefore, before I depart,

¹ The hottest month of the year; it corresponds to April.

Borderland

Send my last greetings to those
Who everywhere are making ready
To give battle to the Monster of Evil.

Christmas Day, 1937

Note: In view of what was happening on the international scene—in Germany, Italy and Japan—this poem sounds prophetic, presaging the outbreak of World War II. This was the time when one dictator strutting across the heart of Europe cast his grim shadow over the future and the call for a 'United Front' echoed through an unheeding world.

ON THE SICK-BED

(*Rogasajyā*)

Published 1940

Ceaseless life floats on the stream of ceaseless death.
 To reach what nameless, purposeless shore
 Does this tiny raft cross the perilous sea?
 What unseen helmsman in my heart
 Is issuing commands without end?
 I know only that millions are moving on—
 Stopping, as they go, to sell their goods.
 He too who stays to receive,
 Vanishes also in a little while,
 All frauds are swallowed ceaselessly by death—
 And yet life is not all fraud!
 Something remains, when all is ended.
 The supreme wealth of existence is gathered in a pitcher
 Whose bottom is riddled with holes.
 What ceaselessly it receives
 It loses drop by drop—
 This constant wastage removes the indolence of accumulation,
 And gathers strength as it goes.
 The formless, ever-moving God—
 Who is and is not,
 Whose quality is in being and non-being,
 Who is both open and hidden—
 In the flow of existence
 By what name shall I call Him,
 In Whom my name
 After its fleeting emergence
 Shall merge again?

On the Sick-bed

4

The light of countless days
You had given as a gift to my eyes—
I knew I should have to pay back all my debts.
To-day, O Lord, you are claiming them—
And yet why does your shadow fall upon my evening
 lamp?
I am only a guest in this world
You have created with your light.
If through the chinks some rays of light linger—
Do not heed, but leave them behind
For me to create a world of my own.
In the dust, where remain
The last traces of your chariot,
Let there be left
Some light, some shade, some illusion!
In the path of that shadow, behind the faded light,
Perhaps you will gather something—
A tiny speck, remnants of my debts to you.

3 Nov. 1940

5

Under the dome of the Universe
The wheel of suffering revolves,
Crushing to fragments the stars and planets.
The sparks flying in all directions
Seek tumultuously to encircle

On the Sick-bed

The suffering of existence
In the net of destruction.

From what workshop of suffering,
From what threshold of inflamed consciousness,
Come the darts of pain
And the bleeding wound?
Tiny is man's body,
But how infinite his power of suffering!
In the world of Creation and Destruction,
Why does blood-red madness
Drench the earthen vessel of this body
With tears?

Man's unconquerable soul gives to the body
Every moment, its infinite value.
Into the sacrificial fire,
She throws the offering of the tortured body.

Is there anywhere in the whole Universe
Such sacrifice?
Such unconquered courage?
Such fearless endurance?
Such defiance of death?
Towards what nameless, anguished shrine
Moves this triumphal journey,
Seeking the end of suffering?
From the fiery cave issue springs
Bearing the waters of healing,
That sustain love
And have no end.

4 Nov. 1940

On the Sick-bed

6

O my little sparrow,
My sparrow of early dawn—
While the night still lingers,
You peck at my window
To enquire if there is any news.
Then without rhyme or reason
You dance your wanton dance
And utter your '*kichi-michi*'.¹

Your saucy tail makes light of all hindrances!
When the robins sing at dawn
They win their reward from the poet.
All morning the hidden cuckoo sings her single note
To show off her skill—
And pushing aside the claim of all others
Receives the applause of *Kālidāsa*.²

You '*care*'³ not a bit for all that
Nor for the high or low of the musical scale.
Entering *Kālidāsa*'s study
You start your '*kichi-michi*',
That ignores all the rules of rhyme.

When in the hall of the Nine-Jewels⁴ the poet sings,
What do you seek there amid the pillars?

¹ An onomatopoeic word in Bengali.

² The great classical poet of Sanskrit literature who lived about the second or third century A.D. in the court of *Ujjaini*.

³ In fun the poet uses the English word '*care*' in the Bengali text.

⁴ *Kālidāsa* in his drama speaks of the 9 jewels (savants) who adorned the court of *Ujjaini*.

On the Sick-bed

You are a neighbour of the poet's beloved
And garrulously hop about her all through the morning;
And your play-acting is not meant as a bribe
To coming Spring.
You dance just as you please—
Neither order nor neatness is in it.
In the festal hall of the forest
You do not enter to pay your respects;
With the light you chat in village dialect
No dictionary can ever explain its meaning;
Your pulsating heart alone knows its intent!
Turning your neck right and left,
Heaven only knows what drollery you enact;
And why this urgency all day long!
Earth holds you attached to her,
And in her dust you bathe;
Such is your careless dress—
No dirt soils it to make you ashamed.
You build your nest on the roof of the royal palace,
And your play of hide-and-seek
Is void of meaning.
When in sleeplessness
I spend the hours of my sorrowful night,
I wait expectantly
For the first sound of your pecking at my door.
You bring to me the simple message of your heart—
Moving and fearless.
The morning light of all things living
Sends its call to me—
O my little sparrow,
My sparrow of early dawn!

11 Nov. 1940: Early morning

On the Sick-bed

9

O ancient Night,
Amidst the pervading gloom of my illness
I see, in Time's first hazy dawn,
You are meditating over Creation!
You are dumb, you are blind,
And terrible is your loneliness!
I see reflected in the skies
The distressed effort of the sick body
Labouring to create.
From the unplumbed depths of slumber
Cry out the crippled;
In the fire of the molten furnace
Glow the hunger for self-expression,
And, in trance, your fingers weave
The enchantment of Art.
Out of the womb of primeval ocean
Rise suddenly massive shapes—
Malformed and imperfect—
Products of dreams!
They are waiting in the dark
To attain their perfection
At the touch of Time's hand.
What is misshapen and ugly,
Shall take perfect form
In the new sunlight.
The image-maker will recite the spell,
And slowly shall be revealed
God's most secret plan!

13 Nov. 1940: Morning

On the Sick-bed

10

When the last shadows of my days
Merge into the dying melody,
Only a whispering murmur shall remain—
Its meaning forgotten!
When the weary traveller shall tarry by the wayside,
The mournful intimations of this melody
Will touch his heart,
And with bowed head he will listen.
Nothing will he grasp, but only this:
In some rare moment of a forgotten age
Someone has lived—
One, of whom men knew nothing,
Has been revealed to him.

13 Nov. 1940: Morning

11

Through the ages the world has been gathering
Its pile of Unforgivingness.
If, unseen, there is an error of even a line,
Then it deletes itself one day—
Though it be after the lapse of ages.
The foundations that seemed eternal,
Shake under the earthquake's dance of destruction.
So many species appeared on the stage of life
Endowed with limitless strength;
But that very strength was their undoing—

On the Sick-bed

Its weight became unbearable
And brought them to extinction.
Nobody knows at what corner of the Universe
Is gathering every moment relentless Unforgivingness.
A fault lying hidden snaps the string
That binds all things together.
One mistake in the flash that gives the signal,
And the way for retreat is barred for ever.
This cruel destruction is but the will
Of the Perfected Whole.

What creation, wondrous and new,
Shall emerge at the end!
The stubborn earth will be pulverized to dust,
All obstacles removed,
And the seed will blossom, bearing new life.
O Unforgivingness!
In the realm of Creation
You are the Supreme Force;
The thorns that lie on the path of Peace
Are crushed ever anew
Under the trampling of your feet.

13 Nov. 1940

12

At morn, as soon as I open my eyes,
I see scattered helter-skelter
Papers, note-books, torn envelopes;
No order, no commas, no semi-colons!

On the Sick-bed

I rummage through them in vain
And never find what I seek.

Here is the world of Man
Stamped with his ingrained indolence!

Suddenly, the hand of Woman intervenes—
And instantly all disorder disappears!
All that was shameless confusion
Her hand transforms into beauty;
All that was torn is mended,
All that was soiled is cleansed,
And nowhere linger the hidden nests of useless
rubbish!

Amid my own untidiness I think in wonder:
In the heart of Creation
Flow these two streams of Man and Woman.
Man gathers round him rubbish;
Woman comes and constantly cleanses it away.

14 Nov. 1940: Noon

13

If the night of sorrow
Has ended her last journey
On the shores of the Past—
May a fresh question arise with wonder
In a new morn,
In the world of eternal childhood.

On the Sick-bed

To the old questions
(Which the intellect could not solve,
Drawing on itself but ridicule)
May I find an answer,
As a child finds his
In playful mirth and simple faith—
The faith that finds content in itself,
That does not dispute,
That with the touch of Joy brings certainty.

15 Nov. 1940: Morning

15

The sick man bears within him a voice imprisoned;
In the fading light—that feeble voice
Creates a prison out of things dim and obscure.
When the waterfall rushes in full force
To conquer the impossible, the far-away,
It denies kinship with the confined cave
And proclaims its right to the Universe.
When in the scorching drouth of April
The stream grows weak and thin,
And loses herself in many shallow pools,
Her own identity becomes lost to herself.

So too my feeble voice has lost its pride,
And has not the strength to censure
The accumulated infirmity of existence.
The mist of inner tormented life
Veils from it the vision of the Universe.

On the Sick-bed

O Sun of early dawn!
I shall behold my most radiant form
In the centre of your luminous heart;
Illumine my meditation with your power,
And with your golden abundance
Remove the penury of my feeble spirit,
Along with the humiliation of defeated night.

21 Nov. 1940

16

Over the dense forest of his heart
Silently descends the dusk of Autumn,
When the light is weary.

Through every moment flows the stream of
 silent nursing;
Along the dark caves flow sluggishly
The hopeless hours of the night
Towards the morning star,
Caressed by the dewy scented breeze.

The faded glow of twilight
Is transformed by the morning light
Into a form benign and good.
I saw blessing quietly borne to me,
With *Sefāli*¹ flowers
On a tray of light.

¹ They blossom and drop to the ground in early dawn, filling the air with sweet scent. Children make garlands of these flowers for those whom they love and revere.

On the Sick-bed

17

I know not when I had fallen asleep—
Awaking I found at my feet a basket of fruits.
Spreading my wings of fancy
I called to mind many dear names.
Round one unknown
Many names gathered,
Coming from every side.
One name grew many names,
That in this gift found their unique significance.

21 Nov. 1940

18

In the world,
Our consciousness is scattered through many fields.
There I see Man spread out in diversity—
Part of him incomplete, part imperfect.
In the sick-room,
One has a deeper insight into him
And beholds him afresh with new wonder.
The mercy of the whole Universe is gathered in
him—
In the touch of his hands,
In the anxious look of his sleepless eyes.

23 Nov. 1940: *Morning*

On the Sick-bed

19

If living toys are made in the Creator's workshop,
Then I realize what is in store for them!
To-day, at the end of my days,
My life's fame lies defeated,
My solemnity ignored,
And all my movements hedged round
With prohibitions and commands:
 'Be silent,'
 'Do not talk too much,'
 'You must eat more.'

These commands—sometimes in rebuke,
Sometimes in entreaty—
Come from those on whose childhood
(When in the nursery was enacted
The tragedy¹ of the broken doll)
The curtain dropped not long ago!
For a while I make a show of fight,
But then I become a good child
And act as I am told.
I think to myself:
The old man, relinquishing for a few days
The burden of governing to the young,
Is smiling slyly from a distance—
Just as the emperor smiled behind the curtains,
At the role he had created for *Abuhosain*.²
In the absolute realm of Destiny
I have always been a rebel—

¹ This English word is playfully used in the Bengali text.

² Refers to the story of Harun el Rashid in the *Thousand and One Nights*.

On the Sick-bed

But in this realm I have accepted her rod,
Which is tenderer than the stalk of the lotus.
Yet the meaning of her pointed finger is plainer
Than that of the thunder!

23 Nov. 1940: Morning

Note: This poem refers to the poet's granddaughter, Nandita, who nursed him with tender care.

20

Amid the impenetrable darkness of my sick-room,
The light that peers through—
What is its meaning?
Just as the passing traveller
Through the slit of a window
Sees imperfectly the lights of festivity,
So does the ray that reaches my heart,
Reveal to me
That when this thick curtain is lifted,
Then shall that primal light shine forth
Beyond time and space!
The eternal sea of Unfolding,
Into which the sun dips for its evening bath,
And from which the stars rise like bubbles—
My pilgrim's journey leads me
To that sea of Supreme Consciousness
At the end of the night.

24 Nov. 1940: Morning

On the Sick-bed

21

Waking in the morning
I find a rose in the vase.
The question comes to my mind:
Through the whirlwind of aeons
The beauty that, avoiding the oppression
Of the ugly, the incomplete,
Matures in the force that produces you—
Is that force blind and indifferent?
Is it like the ascetic
Who makes no distinction between beauty and ugliness?
In this force is there *only* knowledge, *only* strength,
But no comprehension?
Who are they
Who in vain argument assert
That in the assembly of Creation
Beauty and ugliness occupy the same throne?
I am only a poet—
I can follow no disputations;
I see this Universe in her completeness.
In the heavens a million stars bear witness
To her supreme loveliness.
The rhythm does not break,
The song does not stop,
Corruption reveals no deformity.
In the sky
I see the great lustrous Rose
Open, petal by petal.

24 Nov. 1940: Morning

On the Sick-bed

22

At noon—half awake, half asleep—
I saw as in a dream
The outer shell of my being drop off.
In the stream of the Unknown
Floated away all the gatherings of the miser—
His name, his deeds, his honour, his dishonour,
Remembrances of shame
That bore the seal of passing sweetness!
All these I cannot call back.
The Self that is beyond self, asks:
For what do I sigh most?
It is not for the past spent in joy and suffering,
But for the future, ever unattainable—
In whose heart, Hope
Like the seed in the womb of earth
Dreams through the night
For the light that is not yet come.

24 Nov. 1940: *Afternoon*

23

On the way to recovery,
As I received the call of gracious life,
She gave me anew fresh vision
With which to see the world.

On the Sick-bed

This blue expanse bathed in morning light—
The seat of meditation of the *Tapaswi*¹
Revealed to me the timeless first moment
At the beginning of Creation.
I realized that this birth is strung together
With ever new births—
Like the seven-coloured rays of the sun,
One prospect bears within itself,
Unseen, streams of many creations.

25 Nov. 1940: *Morning*

24

In the pure light of early dawn
I saw the Universe consecrated with the crown of Peace.
With bowed heads the trees uttered their benediction.
The Peace that is firmly established at the heart of the Universe,
Preserves herself through all the strife and pain of the Ages.
In this distracted world that Peace manifests herself
At the beginning and at the end of the day.
O Poet, the herald of the Good,
You surely have received her invitation.
If ignoring that call,
You become the mouthpiece of despair,
The emissary of the deformed,
And on the broken harp, playing a false tune,
Distort the eternal Truth of the Universe—
Then what purpose was there in your being born?

¹ A devotee who through meditation and severe austerity (*tapasyā*) attains spiritual fulfilment.

On the Sick-bed

In the rice-fields why do thistles thrive
To affront Man's hunger?
If the sick consider illness to be the ultimate truth,
Far better is it silently to end one's life.
Shall the poet in Man become only an object of disgrace—
By following the paths of unchaste fancy
And donning a shameless mask
Must he dim the lustre of Man's countenance?¹

26 Nov. 1940: Morning

25

Through all the sorrows and sufferings of life,
This message of the sages glows bright
In my heart:
'The Immortal Being manifests himself in Joy.'
To prove the contrary is nothing but empty cleverness,
Trying to belittle the Great.
He who sees Supreme Truth
Beyond Time and Space, in its entirety—
For him alone has life a meaning.

28 Nov. 1940: Morning

¹ This poem recalls to me a telling remark of A. N. Whitehead: 'Scientists who spend their life with the purpose of proving that it [i.e. human life] is purposeless, constitute an interesting subject of study.'

On the Sick-bed

26

I have never put trust in my deeds
But only in my self—
For I know the relentless waves of eternal Time
Will wash those deeds away.
Morning and night,
Filling my soul's chalice with divine nectar,
I have drunk it.
The love I have cherished every moment
Has been garnered in that cup—
The burden of sorrow has not cracked it,
Nor the dust blackened its handicraft.
When I leave the stage of life,
I know that season after season
The flowers shall bear witness
How I have loved this world.
This love, this gift of life
Alone is true;
When I depart,
This undying truth shall confute death.

28 Nov. 1940: *Morning*

27

Open the door—
Let the blue sky pour in unhindered,
And the scent of the flowers enter my room.
Let the first rays of the sun

On the Sick-bed

Bathe my whole being
And lave my nerves.
'I am alive'—this message of welcome
Rustles in the forest leaves—
Let me hear it.
Let the morning wrap me in her veil,
As she wraps the green earth decked in tender grass.
The love that I received in my life—
Her silent voice I hear in the sky,
In the wind.
In her pure waters I take my ablution
And see life's Truth sparkling like a gem
In the heart of the blue.

28 Nov. 1940: Morning

28

The flame of consciousness
That burns bright in my heart
Is not a fortuitous prisoner
Within the narrow confines of life.
That flame, which at the beginning
Rises from the Void,
And at the end
Encounters meaningless death,
Illumines the interval
And gives it significance.
This consciousness throbs through the skies
As Supreme Joy—
Its message echoes in my heart

On the Sick-bed

And holds together sun and stars
In constant rhythm
Through the endless festival of Creation!

28 Nov. 1940: Morning

29

When I see Man
Helpless within the walls
Of his unbearable suffering,
I do not know
Where he will find consolation.
I know the root of this suffering
Is his riotous living,
Is in his folly.
But this knowledge brings no comfort.
When I know
The Truth that is hidden
In Man's spiritual striving
Is beyond pleasure and pain—
Then do I realize
That those Seekers who make fruitful
This truth in their lives,
Are the ultimate goal of Man's destiny.

28 Nov. 1940: Morning

On the Sick-bed

32

Every morning in the gracious touch of light
I receive the homage of Existence—
My blood-stream merges in the stream of light,
And its message echoes silently
In my body, in my mind!

Like cupped hands in supplication,
My eyes turn heavenwards.
This light gave me life's first welcome,
And my life's last offering
Shall be placed on the altar of light,
Behind the shores of the sunset sea.
I feel that all has not been said—
Yet all words are in vain!

The melody of my heart has not been tuned perfectly
To the melody of the sky—
And I have not found my voice.

1 Dec. 1940: Morning

34

When I was tuning the harp to my fitful melody,
You were far away beyond my ken.
How should I know,
Those songs were seeking you
On the shores of the Unknown?

On the Sick-bed

As soon as you came near me,
My songs danced to the rhythm of your steps—
As if in this union
The breath of supreme joy spread through the world
And the flowers bloomed, year after year.
In the song of the poet
His Muse stretches out her cupped hands
To receive the gift of what is yet to be.
In this Universe
The Known plays hide-and-seek with the Unknown.

2 Dec. 1940: Morning

35

Just as after a storm,
The sky in her silent blue depths
Makes free the path for the rays of the rising sun,
So may life become free from the mists of my past,
And trumpets announce the new awakening
At the threshold of my new birth.
I am hoping that the blur of colours
May be wiped away from the light,
This fruitless play with life should end,
And through self-surrender
Selfless love find its supreme value.
As I float in light and darkness
Along the stream of life,
Let me not look back to my past deeds.
The self that is soiled with joy and suffering—

On the Sick-bed

May I be able to place it outside myself,
In the same category
As all the drifting events of life;
And with eyes free from fear or desire,
Look upon this exiled self
As having no relation to me.
And this be my last prayer—
May the infinite purity make complete my being.

3 Dec. 1940: Morning

36

When the clasp of my arms is loosened
From all things that I have ardently desired—
It is then that with a vision
I see the Whole,
Illumined by the morning light.
The Void is not mere emptiness!
Then do I grasp the message of the sages:
'None could live or move,
If the all-pervading Joy filled not the sky.'

3 Dec. 1940: Morning

37

In the dusky twilight I saw suddenly
That the right arm of Death

On the Sick-bed

Is twined round the neck of Life,
And bound to it with threads of blood.
Then, instantly, I recognized them both—
I saw that the bride of Death, taking
The supreme gift from her bridegroom,
And bearing it in her arms,
Travels towards the New Age.

4 Dec. 1940: Morning

38

O Lord of Death,
When you gave your command to destroy,
Man took upon himself the task of self-destruction.
In anguish I muse:
Why has not lost and ill-starred Man
Destroyed in one vast funeral-pyre
His whole kind?
Then I think—
If, through slow suffering, sin does not die,
Its seed will lie dormant in the charred field of
destruction
And sprout forth anew
In the heart of new creation.

5 Dec. 1940: Morning

On the Sick-bed

39

When I do not see you,
I think in my oppressed imagination
That the world is silently conspiring
To vanish beneath my feet.
Then in terror I throw out my arms
To clasp the empty space!
With a shock I awake from my dream,
And find that with bowed head
You are seated beside me, weaving your cloth
And upholding the changeless peace of Creation.

5 Dec. 1940: Morning

RECOVERY

(*Ārogya*)

Published 1941

1

'Sweet is the world, sweet the dust of it,'
 This great hymn I chant in my heart.
 It makes my life significant.
 Day after day the gems of truth come to me
 As a gift—their loveliness dims not.
 Therefore at the border of death, this great hymn—
 'Sweet is the world, sweet the dust of it'—
 Echoes in the heart of Joy.
 When I take with me the last touch of earth,
 I shall proclaim:
 'The mark of Victory,¹ written in dust, is on my
 brow.'
 Behind the *Māyā* of evil
 I have seen the light of the eternal.
 Truth's loveliness has taken form in earth's dust—
 Knowing this, I salute the dust.

14 Feb. 1941: *Morning*

2

Bathed in morning light
 All things are made holy and beautiful.
 The formless One, the limitless,
 With its touchstone creates forms of Joy.
 Under the altar of the ever-old
 Is consecrated the ever-new.

¹ *Tilak*: an auspicious mark on one's forehead—sign of sovereignty or high caste.

Recovery

In sunshine and shadow,
Is woven the cloth of earth
With threads of green and blue.
The leaves dance in rhythm
With the heart-beat of the sky.
From forest to forest,
On the neck of morning
Sparkles the necklace of diamond.
The random songs of birds
Chant their praises to the goddess of life.
The love in the heart of man,
Joined to all these,
Gives them the touch of immortality—
It makes sweet the dust of earth
And spreads over it
The throne of Eternal Man.

12 Jan. 1941: Noon

3

Solitary is the sick-room.
Through the door, shadows fall aslant on my bed.
In the warmth of the wintry morn,
The drowsy hours flow sluggishly
Like a stream choked with weeds.
From time to time,
A sigh from the distant past
Sweeps over the cornless fields.

On this solitary morn with peaceful gaze,
I recite my wordless chant to the Sun:

Recovery

'Begetter of this earth!
In whose glorious light
Man first beheld the veritable form of God—
If full-throated I could chant the Vedic hymns,
Then my praise
Would have mingled with all this light.'
But words fail;
I only gaze at the Far Beyond,
And spread my silence over the pale midday sky.

1 Feb. 1941

5

In this deserted room,
On this silent morn,
I sit before my window.
One hears the song of the green
Pouring out in rhythm.
Under the light of the blue sky
The mind floats on the stream
That flows from the fount of immortality.
To whom shall I send my hymn of praise—
This yearning of my heart?
It seeks voice to give value
To that which is beyond all value—
But it remains silent.
It only says: 'I am happy.'
The rhythm comes to a stop,
But its cadence says: 'I am blest.'

28 Jan. 1941: Afternoon

Recovery

8

Sitting alone by the window at the world's end,
I see the world bathed in blue,
Speaking to me in the language of eternity.
Light comes meshed with shadows.
I hear the refrain:
'It is not far, not far away.'
The path disappears behind the hill of sunset.
At the day's end I stand silent before the inn;
Far away glitters the temple spire—
There sounds the song of the dying day.
In its melody mingles all that is beautiful,
All that touches life, along the pilgrim's path,
With the gesture of perfection.
I hear the refrain:
'It is not far, not far away.'

3 Feb. 1941: Afternoon

10

When I cast my eyes on this earth of dust,
I see the huge gathering of humanity—
Singing, they go their different ways through the Ages,
Fulfilling their various needs in life and death.

They row, they sow, they reap;
They work in the fields and cities.

Recovery

The royal umbrella¹ is lost;
The war-cry is heard no more;
The pillar of victory forgets its own meaning;
The blood-shot eyes, with their blood-drenched
 weapons,
Veil themselves in nursery rhymes.
But men work in country after country,
Near and far.
With their humming, with their singing,
They make the world resound.

The song of life plays night and day
In their joy, in their sufferings.
Empires fall in ruins—
But they work.

13 Feb. 1941: Morning

12

My mind was wide open,
When suddenly the dart of pain pierced it.
At the shock,
The strength that lay hidden in me was released.
In a moment the song of victory descended,
And piercing the dark clouds
Spread the joyous light into my heart.
The humiliation of my sick-room vanished;
On the carpet spread out for the world,
I found my place

¹ Emblem of sovereignty.

Recovery

In the world of Bliss.
My mind tasted Joy supreme,
And with gladness
Found her home in the realm
Where man is freed from bondage.
There all shadows disappear—
The shadows of sorrow that wound
And bring weariness to the heart.

14 Feb. 1941: Noon

13

Love came to me in my youth
Like the babbling gladness of a waterfall.
It came from the distant peaks
With a frown and a laugh;
It overflowed the rocks
That barred its way:
In the midst of the Known
It brings the language of the Unknown,
Of the never-thought-of,
The mysterious;
Around all that is fixed, limited, and of everyday,
It brings its turbulent current of revolt.

To-day that love,
With the tender solace of Silence,
Lies concealed in the depths;
It unites effortlessly
With the Peace that pervades the entire universe.

Recovery

Its light is in the light of the stars,
Its loveliness in the flowers that deck the forest
With worship.

30 Jan. 1941: Noon

14

Every morning my devoted dog
Waits silently by the chair
Till I have greeted him with a touch.
Receiving this slight recognition
His whole body thrills with joy.
Among all dumb creatures,
He alone, piercing the veil of good and bad,
Has seen Man in his entirety—
A being for whom he can give life gladly,
To whom he can pour out love without reason,
From a dim awareness that gropes its way
Towards the world of consciousness.
When I see the self-offering of this mute heart,
Pleading its own need,
I cannot imagine what unique value
His simple wisdom has found in Man.
With his wordless look of pathetic bewilderment,
What he comprehends he cannot put into words;
But to me he reveals the true significance of Man
In the scheme of Creation.

24 Dec. 1940

Recovery

15

Crossing the sea of good and evil fame,
In life's evening I have arrived at the landing-stage
For my departure.
I kept boundless faith in this body.
Now with age it laughs at itself
And denies me control over it.
Those who keep watch night and day,
To protect me from such indignity,
And stand by me, at the day's last preparation—
They are in my heart, though nameless they abide.
They have brought me life's last good fortune,
And make me forget the frail body's defeat.
They stand witness
That fame and glory are for the great and the strong,
While the best gift remains for the weak.
Fame demands hard tribute from life
And allows no respite;
But the need that draws to itself the offering of love
Bears the stamp of infinity.

9 Jan. 1941: Morning

16

Day after day passes by,
I sit silently and muse:
The gifts I received in life—
How much have I wasted?

Recovery

How much did I receive what was my due?
How much did I give what was due from me?
What remains as my last sustenance?
In what melody remains
The touch of those who came near to me,
And those who went far away?
Absent-minded, I may have ignored some—
To-day their parting steps echo in vain!
Perhaps, unknown to me, some have forgiven
And departed, not uttering a word.
If I have blundered,
Will they still nurse the wound
When I am gone?

So many threads have snapped
In the garment of life,
And there will not be time to tie them up.
At life's end,
If some affront of mine wounds the love
That waits for me—
May death's hands heal it!
On this I muse again and again.

13 Feb. 1941: Afternoon

23

Woman, you are blest!
You have your home, your household work—
In the midst of it you keep a little gap
Through which you hear the cry of the weak.
You bring your offering of service

Recovery

And pour out your love.
Woman! you hear day and night the call
Of the goddess of life,
Who in her mind bears the power of serving.
You have taken upon yourself the Creator's work
And are his helper.
You open the way to recovery
And ever renew the out-worn world;
For the unfortunate, the luckless,
Your patience is endless—
Their helplessness calls out your mercy.
Again and again, the callous, the intolerant
Insult you;
Wiping your tears away
You forgive them.
With bowed head, at ingratitude's door,
Night and day you suffer wounds.

The hapless and useless one,
Whom the goddess of life throws as waste away,
You lift up,
And the heat of his humiliation
You cool with soothing hands.

To him you give worship as to a god
And your nursing care!
Quietly, bravely, in beauty's form,
You carry within you
The preserving force of the universe,
And for the fallen, the broken, the deformed,
The gracious touch of the Lovely One!

13 Jan. 1941: Morning

Recovery

24

By my sick bed
Sluggishly flows the stream of life.
With weeds I create little shapes of beauty.
They have no great value—
And yet some recognition of life cleaves to them,
Though slight their value.

23 Jan. 1941: Morning

25

The unuttered words in the vast mind of Man
Wander through space like nebulae.
Striking against the boundary of my mind,
They condense, take form,
And revolve round my study.

5 Dec. 1940: Morning

29

In this life I have received the blessing
Of the Beautiful One,
And in the love of man tasted her nectar.

In sorrow's unbearable day,
I have come to know the soul

Recovery

That is beyond defeat, beyond hurt.
The day Death's imminent shadow touched me,
I did not own defeat at the hand of fear.
I have not been deprived of the touch of Man Supreme—
His imperishable message I have gathered to my heart,
And in grateful remembrance cherish the gifts
Received from the Lord of Life.

28 Jan. 1941: Afternoon

32

I know the Joy that, hidden in the heart of light,
Touches me,
Is one with my own soul.
I have been anointed in the holy waters
Of Consciousness,
That flow from the font of light,
And have my share of immortality.
In this multitudinous earth
I can be united with the Supreme Me
And enter the paths of Bliss.

33

Let the veil of self dissolve!
Piercing the haze,
Let the white lustre of Consciousness
Reveal Truth's imperishable form

Recovery

In the midst of all men
Let a ray from the heart of Eternal Man
Radiate into my consciousness.
The Peace that reigns in the region of Silence,
Above the turmoil of this world—
May I see it before I go!
The tangled complexities of life
That have no meaning,
And carry with them false values of this world—
May I brush them all aside
And before passing the borderline of life,
May her true meaning be revealed
To my eyes.

11 Māgh 1347 (Bengali date)¹
About 25 Jan. 1941

¹ This is a very sacred day for the members of the Brāhmo Somāj (the Theistic Church of India), for on this day in the year 1830 Rāmmohan Roy founded this reformed Church for the worship of the One God in the spirit of the Upanishads. The translator remembers the Poet giving soul-stirring sermons on this day through all his school and college years.

LAST POEMS

(Sesh Lekhā)

Published June 1942

1

In front stretches the ocean of Peace.
 O Helmsman, sail out to the open sea.
 You will be my eternal companion—
 Take, O take me in your arms.
 The Pole-star will shine
 Lighting the path to Eternity.
 O Lord of Deliverance,
 Your forgiveness, your mercy
 Shall be my everlasting sustenance
 On my journey to the shores of Eternity.
 May the bonds of earth dissolve,
 The mighty Universe take me to her arms,
 And I come to know fearlessly
 The Great Unknown.

3 Dec. 1939: *Afternoon*

Note: It was the poet's wish that this song should be sung at the commemoration Service after his death. It was, for the first time.

2

Death cannot swallow life, which is immortal;
 It only casts its shadow like *Rāhu*¹
 This I know for certain.
 There is no plunderer
 Hiding in the secret caves of the Universe

¹ The demon who is supposed to devour the sun during an eclipse.

Last Poems

Who can defraud love of its value—
This I know for certain.
What was the ultimate Truth for me,
Was nothing but a disguise
In which the ultimate Falsehood hid itself—
This disgrace of Existence
The law of the Universe could never bear,
This I know for certain.
Everything is driven
By the ceaseless movement of change—
This is but the law of Time.
That death is not
The ultimate expression of the changeless—
This I know for certain.
The self said: 'The world is!'
That truth is verified
By the supreme truth of the 'I' within me—
This I know for certain.

7 May 1940

3

O bird,
From time to time why do you forget your song?
Why do you not send out your call?
Without your songs the morning is profitless—
Do you not know that?
The first rays of early dawn touch the trees,
In the trembling of the leaves your melody awakes;
You are a friend of the morning light—

Last Poems

Do you not know that?
The goddess of Awakening is sitting
With robe trailed loose beside my bed—
Do you not know that?
Do not deprive her of your songs.
Into the dreams of Sorrow's night
Your morning hymns bring the message of new
life—
Do you not know that?

11 Feb. 1941: *Afternoon*

5

If I can, I shall find once again
The seat in whose lap is spread
The endearing message of a far-distant land.

The dreams of the past
Will crowd together again,
And humming a dim melody
Will build anew the nest.

Calling back happy memories
It will make awakening sweet;
The flute that has become silent
Will find its melody again.

With hands outstretched she
Will linger on the balcony;
In the dark night,
Along the scented path of the Spring
Will be heard the footfall of the Great Silence.

Last Poems

The beloved from the far-away land,
Who with her love has spread the carpet,
Will keep for ever her message
Resounding in my ears.

She, whose language I knew not,
Who spoke only with her eyes—
Her message will echo in tender music
Through all eternity.

6★

Now has come Man Supreme
Man after God's own heart!
The world is a-tremble with wonder
And the grass quivers.
In heaven resounds the conch,
On earth plays the drum of Victory—
The sacred moment has come
That brings the Great Birth!
The gates guarding the moonless night have fallen,
The hill of sunrise rings with the call 'Fear not'
And ushers in the dawn of a new life!
The heavens thunder the song of Victory:
'Man has come!'

Apr. 1941

* 'The stream of all my creations and my feelings have found their end in Man. Again and again have I sent my call to my God and He has revealed Himself both in Man and in the Formless, in Enjoyment as well as in

Last Poems

10

To-day in the midst of my birthday
I am lost.
I want near me my friends--
The gentle touch of their hands.
I shall take with me—
Earth's ultimate love,
Life's parting gift,
Man's last blessing.
My bag is empty to-day.
All that I had to give,
I have given utterly.
The little gifts I receive daily—
Some affection, some forgiveness—
I shall take with me,
When in my little raft
I make my last crossing
To the voiceless festival of the End!

6 May 1941 (Tagore's last birthday): Morning

Renunciation. The spirit of Man reveals itself both in Personality and in the Inexpressible. . . . There, where Man is immortal, in that sphere do I want to live. It is for this reason, that amidst narrow, cramping confines I cannot pursue in my efforts to realize the Supreme Man. Immortality dwells only there, where Man dwells in the Universal. Our manhood becomes eclipsed, whenever we turn to ourselves and away from Him.' (From a letter in Bengali, written about 1890.)

Last Poems

7

I know life is sacred.
One knows not by what unseen path she has come,
Rising from the fountain of the Unknown,
And taken form in wondrous reality.
Filling his golden pitcher
The sun bathes and purifies life each morning.

This life has given voice
To the day, to the night;
It decks with flowers the temple
For the worship of the Unseen,
And in silent twilight
Kindles the lamp of evening.
Her first love
Life offered to the world.
At her golden touch
All my daily loves blossom forth—
I have loved my beloved,
I have loved the flowers of this world;
Whatever she touches,
She makes it her very own.
With a book she enters the world—
At first the pages are bare,
Gradually they fill,
And when the day ends
The picture becomes clear
And the beads of self-knowledge are strung
together.
Then the heedless artist
Draws a black line

Last Poems

Through the letters;
But a few remain—
Those in letters of gold.
They shine along with the Pole-Star—
A delight to the heavens.

25 Apr. 1941

11

On the shores of *Rupanārāyan*¹
I awoke and realized
That the world is not a dream.
In letters of blood I beheld my own form.
Through a thousand wounds,
Through a thousand sufferings
I came to know myself.
I have loved the hard Truth—
She never deceives!
This life is but a severe *tapasyā*²
Till life's end;
To earn the hard prize of Truth
All debts must be paid by dying.

13 May 1941: Morning

¹ The God who expresses himself in many forms.

² To undergo severe austerities for the sake of attaining some high goal.

Last Poems

12

Your birthday is a festival of gifts—
At this festival, early dawn
Decorates herself in many colours.
In flowers and leaves
Life pours out its gifts with abandon.

From time to time Nature tests her treasure-
house—

You have given her that chance.
The Lord is eager to bring together
Him who gives, and him who receives.
To-day that wish of His is fulfilled
And in joyous wonder
The Poet of the universe blesses you.
In this rain-washed, clear sky of July
You stand witness to His Poetry.

13 July 1941: Morning

13

The day's first sun had asked:
'Who are you?'
It received no answer!
Year after year it passed away.
The day's last sun uttered its last question—
In twilight's silence,
On the shores of the Western Sea—

Last Poems

'Who are you?'
It received no answer!

27 July 1941: Early morning

14

The dark night of Sorrow
Has come again and again to my door.
Her only weapon was—
The troubled appearance of suffering,
The frightened gesture of fear,
The dark disguise of deception!
Each time I believed in her mask of terror,
Each time I suffered meaningless defeat!
This play of losing and winning,
This false magic of life,
This terror at every step—
Bound up with life from childhood—
Is full of the taunts of suffering.
The skilled hands of Death spread through darkness,
This restless picture of many-hued terror.

29 July 1941

15★

You have strewn the path of Creation
With nets of many guiles,
O Guileful One.

* Cf. 'Whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth and scourgeth every son
whom He receiveth.' *Heb. xii, 6.*

Last Poems

With skilful hands you have woven
The net of false beliefs
In this simple life,
And stamped greatness with this deceit.
For the Seeker,
You have not kept the secret night.
The way your stars show to him
Is the way to the inner heart—
It is for ever clear,
This way radiant with a simple faith.
Tortuous it may be outwardly,
But inwardly it is straight—
Herein is its glory.
He is thought of as one deceived.
Truth he finds in the heart
Washed by his own inner light.
Nothing can deceive him;
His last reward he carries to his treasure-house.
He who effortlessly can bear your playful deceit,
Receives at your hand the imperishable right
To Peace.

30 July 1941: Morning

APPENDIX

(Letter by Tagore on his religion)

Shanti Niketan
Bolpur Bengal

Feb. 25. 1914

Dear Madam

Many thanks
for your very kind letter. I
do not belong to any religious
sect nor do I subscribe to
any particular creed. This
I know that the moment
my God has created me he
has made himself mine.

Appendix

He is ever active in the unfolding of my being through experiences of life and in the enfolding of it with the varied forces and beauties of this world. The very fact of my existence carries an eternal guarantee of love.

Yours truly
Rabindranath Tagore

Note: Compare this letter with a passage from Yeats: "The mystic with his powerful subjective experience of God has always been inclined to conflict with church and its dogma."